1999

Landmarks, Americans Visions

Carol Moseley-Braun

Lan
SINGULA

by Carol Moseley-Braun

More than 200 organizers assembled at the first conference of the International Network to Freedom Association, which was held in late January in Memphis, Tenn. All present were committed to the commemoration of the Underground Railroad, and many had worked for years without significant financial support for their endeavors. For these activists, last year's passage of federal legislation providing funds for site designation and educational programs (see "There's a Movement Afoot," *American Visions,* February/March 1999) offered encouragement that their efforts to preserve this portion of American history would at last reach fruition.

The association's founder and executive director, Addie Richburg, initiated the Memphis gathering to begin the process of bridge-building. "The purpose of the conference," she says, "was to allow everyone to vent, to voice their opinions and describe their programs to a larger mix. This enables everyone to get ideas, and to become motivated or challenged by what others might be doing." At present, Richburg is collaborating with the National Parks Service on the creation of a database of Underground Railroad organizations; she is also committed to identifying—and then directing the Underground Railroad groups toward—possible funding sources.

Members of this largely grassroots movement are acutely aware of the impact of federal funds, but they seem determined not to be defined by budget debates in Washington. Like the courageous runaway slaves and abolitionists whom they honor, those toiling to memorialize the Underground Railroad are propelled by an independent vision: the recognition of freedom. Remarkably, their purpose was conveyed most compellingly by the ex-legislator who helped champion their cause within Congress, Senator Carol Moseley-Braun of Illinois. The following is an excerpt of the address that she delivered at the conference's closing banquet.—*S.F.*

Quincy, Ill., sits on the Mississippi River, at the westernmost point of the state. Today, preservationists are engaged in restoring the home of Dr. Richard Eells, a resident of the town whose activities in 1842 provide an eloquent contribution to the legacy of the Underground Railroad.

It seems a runaway slave, known only as Charley, escaped into Illinois, presumably out of Missouri and across the Mississippi, and was met and provided transport by Dr. Eells. Attempting to avoid those who would capture him, the runaway jumped out of Dr. Eells' buckboard. There is a marker today—in a park in the center of town—indicating the spot where he escaped.

Dr. Eells returned home, put the horses up wet, and attempted to disguise his foray into the night by donning his dressing gown before the law arrived. But the condition of the horses gave him away, and he was brought to trial before Judge Stephen Douglas. Found guilty of violating the Fugitive Slave Act, Dr. Eells was fined a hefty $400. His family's appeals of that conviction provide us with a record of the facts, as well as of the opinion of the jurist who tried him.

Stephen Douglas was one of the most important politicians of his time. After presiding on the bench in Quincy, he went on to serve as U.S. senator from Illinois. A leading figure in the debate regarding slavery, Douglas was the sponsor and author of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a critical compromise on the slavery issue that allowed the newly acquired territories of Kansas and Nebraska to determine by popular vote whether or not to adopt or prohibit slavery within their borders. Congress passed this legislation in 1854, thereby widening the schism between pro- and antislavery forces, a separation that festered and six years later brought about the Civil War.

In 1992, I was elected to the U.S. Senate

marks

RITY OF PURPOSE

from Illinois—the first woman from my state, the first African-American woman, and the second African American to serve in this century. The initial meeting of each Senate session is held in the Capitol's Old Senate Chamber. The body met there from 1810 until 1859, when the current chamber was first occupied. I sought out the seat of Douglas, the senator from Illinois who had last served in that chamber, and found it in the third row back. As I positioned myself in his place, I could not help becoming overwhelmed by the justice that the people of Illinois had finally given Charley and Dr. Eells.

The legacy of the Underground Railroad is its affirmation of the triumph of the human spirit over America's original sin. It is almost impossible to imagine today how profoundly difficult and singularly unpopular the positions of Charley and Dr. Eells must have been in 1842.

You have to be very motivated to cross the Mississippi River under cover of darkness; you have to be fanatically committed to risk life and property to help a lawbreaker escape to freedom. And yet, all of the participants—the blacks and whites who together flouted racism and slavery's unjust legal framework—not only have provided us with a proud chapter in our history, but also have pointed the way to our future. The story of their heroism, the nobility of their cause, and the diversity of their efforts is a key to perfecting our democracy.

The Founding Fathers certainly spoke truths, but those truths were far from self evident when they were made part of our national compact. In fact, when the Constitution was written, neither women nor the poor were allowed to vote, and blacks were counted as three-fifths of a person for purposes of the census. The vast majority of the population were relegated to a limited set of roles defined by their stations in life. The core values so eloquently articulated in the Constitution and in the Declaration of Independence were contradicted by the institution of slavery. It was the abolitionist movement that challenged people to face that truth in spite of themselves and their immediate interests.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once referred to the Declaration of Independence as a declaration of intent. The abolitionist movement and its spiritual heir, the civil rights movement, helped move our country closer to the moral intent of its most fundamental and core values. These were liberation movements that sought to free human potential and capacity by giving life to our professed political compact.

They moved Americans of all races to reach for those self-evident truths, and by expanding the liberty upon which our national identity depends, they moved in the direction of perfecting our democracy.

And so it is that we are called to continue the movement to fulfill the promise of that declaration of intent.

Each of us is charged with a personal responsibility to take up the challenge of perfecting our democracy. We are invested with a generational duty to build on the lessons of the past and to pass on to the next generation no less than we inherited from the last. So long as some citizens are more American than others, and so long as human potential and capacity are limited by accidents of birth, such as race or gender or disability or wealth, we will have failed to make our republic live up to its promise.

The story of the Underground Railroad can inspire Americans of all races to embrace the universal values that inspired its participants.

From that "common ground" we can reach an affirmation of purpose that must be embraced by our generation. Each of us has different talents, different interests and different contributions to make, but each of us can make a difference that will shape the next generation's options and opportunities. The abolitionists helped make it possible for a black woman to serve in the Senate of the United States. As a senator, I was proud to be able to celebrate their efforts by passing laws to commemorate their sacrifices. Others will continue to tell their story or teach a child or preserve some part of that history. To the extent that we take up our individual actions in behalf of a commonly held goal, our efforts can and will succeed.

Our challenge is to move our nation toward the fulfillment of its noble intent. If—in our myriad and various ways, but with full reference to the core values which bring us together as Americans—we address that challenge with the same vision and vigor and courage and singularity of purpose that are the legacy of the Underground Railroad, we will have met our generational and personal responsibility both to those who went before and to those who will come after us.